



# AFFECTING NARRATIVE

OF THE

EXTREME PERSONAL SUFFERINGS OF

## NEIL DEWAR,

(WHO HAS LOST BOTH HIS LEGS AND ARMS,)

SOMETIME SEAMAN OUT OF GREENOCK,

BUT LATE OF THE SCHOONER

## Rebecca of Quebec,

WRECKED ON THE COAST OF LABRADORE,

*20th November, 1816,*

AND OF THE PAINFUL ENTERPRISES AND DEATH OF

CAPTAIN MAXWELL AND CREW,

BELONGING TO THE SAID SCHOONER REBECCA.

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## AFFECTING NARRATIVE, &c.

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HAVING been frequently asked what part of the kingdom I belong to, and other particulars respecting my life and parentage, I think it proper here to state, that I was born at Lochgilphead, Argyllshire, in the year 1793. My father was a wright to trade, and chiefly in the employment of Mr. M'Neill of Oakfield. After having received the usual education of a tradesman's son in Scotland, my father, when I was about twelve years of age, intended to teach me his own trade, but after a few months, I thought of trying the sea, and bound myself an apprentice with Captain M'Lachlan of the brig Lord Collingwood, belonging to Greenock. Having served my apprenticeship, I engaged in the Robust, Captain Landales, for Jamaica, at which place I was impressed into the Navy, and put on board the Cleopatra frigate, Captain Gill, where I continued three years cruising off the Spanish Main. This frigate was ordered home, and for two years after I served in several

others of His Majesty's ships, when I was at length paid off from the *Sophia* sloop of war at Deptford. Having again returned to Greenock, I embarked on board the *Montreal*, Captain Reside, of that port, for Montreal in Canada.

Here I and four others of the crew went to Quebec, and embarked on board the *Rebecca*, Captain Maxwell, for Cape Charles, on the coast of Labradore, for a cargo of fish. Having returned to Quebec, we took in some other goods, and on our voyage to Cadiz, the *Rebecca* was wrecked on the coast of Labradore, where my painful and unfortunate disasters, from the inclemency of the season, it being winter, and the inhospitable climate, commenced.

For a more particular account of what followed, and my great sufferings and present helpless situation, I refer the reader to my Narrative, and trust to meet with the charitable assistance of a humane and generous public.

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**W**E sailed from Quebec on the 8th day of October, 1816, in the *Rebecca*, Captain Maxwell, bound for Cadiz, intending to call in at Cape Charles for some more fish, to make up the cargo, for it consisted chiefly of fish. Our voyage was prosperous, till the 17th of November, when being off the harbour of Cape Charles, on the coast of Labradore, it came to blow so very hard, that we had to carry very low canvas. The wind was about north by west, and the harbour lying about north and south, and the



...being under way and the sails hoisted, we found it impossible to get the vessel on. We made a signal of distress with the flag, but the boats were made a signal that they could give us no assistance, and being on the ice-bound coast we stayed along the coast about 20 miles or more before we gave up. At 10 p.m. it came to blow so far as the land, with a heavy fall of snow, that we were obliged to leave the vessel to, and we lay in the ice for the space of three days, when our situation became very alarming, the wind shifting from north-east to north-west.

The Captain gave orders that we must endeavour to clear the land, and accordingly at seven in the morning of the 10th, we bore up for that purpose. The night was completely dark, and the wind so strong, accompanied with unprecedented showers of intense hail and sleet, that we run under the bare poles till eleven o'clock of the same evening. Being now off Cape Norman, in the Straits of Bellisle, the sternward watch being on deck, the man that was keeping a look-out forward on the fore-castle, was heard cry to the watch below, "Beware a head upon deck, men! for we are close upon a rock." No sooner had he uttered these words, than the vessel gave a tremendous dash, she then recoiled, and on striking again, both masts fell over the side, close by the deck; the bowsprit followed, leaving the whole fore-castle completely torn up. Here our miserable situation was extremely distressing, no tongue can describe this awful scene in its true colours; no

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thing but present death was presented to our view; our vessel being full of water, and the sea breaking over her to such a degree, that she was in danger of breaking up in a thousand pieces every moment.

We now remained motionless, surrounded with all the hideous terrors of unavoidable destruction. By this time two of our crew, James Allan and Daniel Morrison, with Mr. Thomson our only passenger, got upon the boltsprit to make for the island, which was distant about a gunshot, but were all instantly whirled to the bottom, there being six of us remaining to meet our doom—to stay we could not—to proceed was death. At last finding our tempest-beaten vessel beginning to give way, uncertain of our doom, we took to the long boat, as the only resource for the preservation of our precious lives, and, under the sole protection of the Divine Being, reached the island about one hour after we first struck.

On attempting to land, the boat upset, and I, Neil Dewar, the most unfortunate, was precipitated on the rugged face of a rock which was naked by the repercussion of the surge: then dashed prostrate on the beach, where I lay for some time insensible, and on recovering a little, found both my knees and elbows severely wounded by the fall. Here we remained for three days, destitute of a morsel to eat, or any thing to cover us from the inclemency of the tempest, which, with frequent showers of snow and hail, kept pelting at us with redoubled violence. Meanwhile, our mate and one seaman died from fatigue and hunger. The bodies of the two men who leaped with Mr. Thom-

son on the boltsprit were washed towards us; and having no method to bury them, we covered them with the others in the snow, out of our sight. On the 24th, the tempest being now greatly abated, Capt. Maxwell, Charles Donaldson, Richard M'Fie, and myself, the only survivors, agreed to leave this island, and steer for the main-land. Accordingly, about nine, *a. m.*, we set sail in the jolly-boat, which had driven from the wreck, steering her with an oar, and bailing her all the way till about one, *p. m.*, when we reached the land, being a distance of two leagues. On preparing to land, the surf which ran very high, took the boat in the stern, filled her with water, and swept Captain Maxwell into the tide. Donaldson and M'Fie hastened to his assistance, but I, from the effects of my similar fate, was incapable of rendering him any aid. They however succeeded in bringing him to the strand, where he remained speechless for a few minutes, then dropped down, gave a deep sigh, and bade a long adieu to us, his fellow sufferers.

In vain did we lament our helpless condition, in vain did we look in every direction for an asylum to our houseless heads, bounded on one side by a barren wilderness, and on the other by inland lakes and rivers. Donaldson and M'Fie, compelled by hunger alone, left me in the evening, while they went in search of some subsistence or place of refuge, promising to return, if in life, the following day. Being unable through my wounded knees and elbows to go with them, I sat down by the remains of my Captain, brooding over my helpless situation; the night freez-



ing very hard, with a strong easterly wind. Now again the day appearing in the east, after passing a long and dangerous night, expecting every moment to be devoured by some wild beast, I then got upon my feet, and looking round me, I saw the jolly boat tossing among the surf, upon the beach. I then thought upon my shipmates who had left me the night before, what might have become of them, thinking that they had been killed by the wild animals that inhabit this country. At a loss what to do, I considered it best to follow. Accordingly I set out, and crawled to the top of the cliff, and steered my course to the westward along shore, following their feet marks in the snow. I continued my journey till night, and betook myself to rest under a leafless tree. I passed a very restless night, being frequently disturbed by the howling of a wolf, and I imagining by the sound, that the animal was approaching me, I climbed up the tree for safety. Daylight coming on, I looked round me, and found I was, as it were, completely blockaded, for the snow which had fallen through the night, had filled up their feet marks. Being now without any guide whereby I could trace the course of my shipmates, I resolved on my departure from the tree, and steering my course back towards the place where I left my Captain's remains under the cliff, where I arrived about eleven *a. m.*, I sat myself down by the back of the cliff, and soon fell fast asleep. My companions returned about noon that day, with the intelligence of their having fallen in with the vacant hut of an Indian, to which place



they conveyed me, supporting me between them, we reached it about six in the evening, and next morning determined to travel in one direction, till we should meet either death or remedy.

We accordingly set out on the 26th of November, about eight in the morning, and continued journeying for ten days without seeing a human being, subsisting all the time, on the frost-withered fruit of the rowan tree, which we casually fell in with, and reposing in the night close to each other, under the shelter of a leafless thorn. On the eleventh day of our journey, and fifteenth of our calamity, we came to a place called Nady Bay Head, the hill being so high and steep, and covered with snow, that we thought we should never get up to the top, and I being lame, was unable to keep up with my shipmates; the snow giving way under me, I came down to the bottom of the hill. However, I tried it again, taking care of my steps. By this time Donaldson and M'Fie had reached the top, and began a shouting and waving their hats, for joy that they had seen a house. I hurried up towards them with enlivened speed. We then sat down on the top of the hill to rest ourselves, uncertain whether it was a house or not. We then saw a person coming down towards the beach; we shouted to him, thinking he might hear, and come across the bay with a boat to us, the distance being about two or three leagues, however, he did not hear us. We then set off again, and sliding down the west side of the hill to the bottom, and began journeying round the head of the bay, till we came to a narrow part that divided the

island from the mainland, here we saw the mark of men and dogs feet in the snow, and a small boat hauled up on the ice. We sat down on the snow to rest a little, when presently, from the woods, started four large dogs, who began a growling and barking as if they would have devoured us. Presently followed two wild savage looking fellows, dressed in hairy clothes, and each of them having a gun on his shoulder. We first addressed them by a recital of our misery, humbly imploring admission to their habitation to die, as we said, by their fireside. However barbarity over-ruled their humanity, and at our misery and solicitations they smiled with contempt. At last they consented to our request. It was at a place called Cape Carpoon, about fifty miles from the wreck. I was by this time so far spent, that I could hardly draw one foot after the other, they being swelled to an unwieldy bulk. We at last reached the hut, 'this being the fourteenth day from the wreck.

Upon entering the hut, Mr. Isaac Isaacs, (this was the fisherman's name the hut belonged to) placed us by a good fire side, and treated us with some bread and spruce beer. He then ordered one of his Indians to bring a tubful of ice water to sock our boots, and with a knife, he ripped down the back part of our boots, and turned them over our feet, and in drawing off the stockings, the skin and toe nails came off along with them. He next applied a poultice of fish blubber and Castile soap, and laid us by the fire, with a boat's sail over us. Our situation now began

to thwart the cruelty of our host, and he endeavoured to show a great deal of commiseration. Donaldson in a few days was seized with a mental derangement, and died in a fit of delirium. M'Fie and I were now looking to meet with the same fate as poor Donaldson, both our arms and legs having mortified, and our host told us, that to save our lives, we must lose our limbs. Poor Richard, with a regardlessness of his doom, said, I will willingly risk my fate, hoping either of us may be left to tell our friends what we experienced. The mortification was rapidly spreading, and from my natural timidity, I begged Richard to suffer first, which he did, but no stoppage could be made of the great effusion of blood, till death in a short time terminated his agonizing existence. I then was placed for the awful operation, which was performed on Christmas morning.

The surgeon being a fisherman, first began with a large seal-knife, by carving the flesh off both legs about an inch above the ankle, then breaking and severing the bones, and afterwards applying a preparation of hot pitch and rozin, as the only remedy to stop the sanguinary discharge, which happily succeeded. He then proceeded to my arms, which he treated in like manner. During this torture, I was lulled as it were into the arms of death, insensible to every act, save the amputation of my left hand, which with my right hand, was cut off by the wrist. Next morning, the reflexion of my extreme personal torture, unable to convey a particle of food to my lips, lying at once a complete object of sympathy and dis-



gust, the prospect of a lingering death, in a desolate region, far from the consolation of a friend, and enduring the most excruciating pain, drew around me a combination of ideas which filled my mind with all the images of relentless despair. In a few days after the amputation of both my legs and arms, I was carried on a sledge drawn by twelve dogs, twenty miles in the thickest of the forest, where they erected a hut to pass the severest of the winter. Now the fishing season coming on, it was proposed to move back to our former residence. Accordingly on the 20th of May, we moved to the island of Carpoon, where I was placed in my old birth by the fire side, with a boat's sail over me, and was pretty well taken care of by Mr. Isaacs. Being an old man, he partly kept the house or hut, while the others were employed at their work out of doors. I began gradually to gather strength, and was able to crawl about the hut. In this affliction I lived eight months, but by the interposition of Divine Providence, I was conveyed on board of a vessel called the Lilly of Quebec, Captain Stewart, and reached Quebec on the 23d of September, 1817. I was sent to the general hospital, and underwent a second operation by Doctors Hicket and Holmes. I was well attended by the nuns. So I began slowly to recover, and was advised by the Doctors to go to Britain. Accordingly on the 28th of June, I took a passage in the Robert, Captain Neil, from Quebec, and reached Greenock on the 7th of August, 1818. I was conveyed to the Royal Infir-

mary in Glasgow, where I underwent a third amputation by Doctors Corkindale and Cummin.

The painful remembrance of my past miseries, with a constitution brought down to the utmost debility, and the idea of a sorrowful pilgrimage, represented to me the necessity of being with one who must treat me as a nurse doth a child. All that I now pray for is, that which may yield me a little earthly happiness, as it alone can secure a temporal alleviation of my destitute state, but I look for it only from those whose generous feelings this narration may affect.

NEIL DEWAR.

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